

DEEPLY REGIONAL JAPAN®

‘UKISHIMA’: JAPANESE STEAMED EGG SPONGE CAKE

16 July 2020; UPDATED: 17 July 2020



‘Ukishima’ is a type of traditional Japanese cake that is less widely known than the ‘kasutera’, the Japanese egg sponge cake with its distinct soft and moist texture. Sometimes called ‘mushi-kasutera’ or ‘steamed kasutera’, it differs from kasutera in that the main ingredient is sweet bean paste, in addition to egg, sugar and flour. The name means ‘floating island’, i.e. small islands made of floating vegetation and debris found in lakes and marshes—alluding to the way the cake froths and rises as it is steamed. [NOTE: The French dessert ‘floating island’ is a completely different and unrelated recipe.] The cake is prepared without the use of fats or oils, resulting in lightness that is traditionally favoured by the Japanese. The recipe is somewhat similar to the Okinawan ‘chīrunkō’ and the Chinese ‘jidangao’, and together with kasutera, is one of several sponge cake recipes in Asia that developed from European influence through maritime trade during the 16th to 17th centuries.

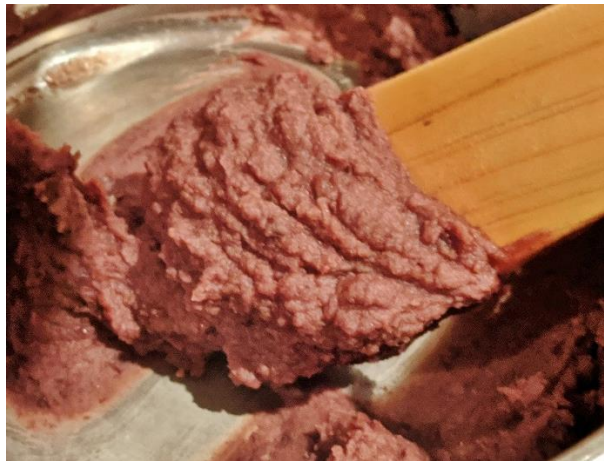
This ukishima is a basic version using adzuki bean paste, which results in a subdued colour to the cake. You can achieve different colour effects by using white bean paste (e.g. from cannellini beans), matcha (powdered green tea) with white bean paste, cocoa powder with adzuki bean paste, and so on—the Japanese often combine several colours in one cake for a brilliant effect. The smooth-textured ‘koshi-an’ bean paste is required for a light and airy texture—see separate recipe for how to make koshi-an at home, or alternatively, use a canned paste available in some Asian grocery stores. Soft wheat flour is often used in ukishima recipes, however, I have opted for rice flour here to keep it wheat free.

INGREDIENTS

- ‘Koshi-an’ adzuki bean paste (see separate recipe for how to prepare this) c. 200 g
- Boiled adzuki beans (see separate recipe for how to prepare them from dry beans) c. ½ cup
- Egg, separated into yolk and whites 3 medium-sized
- Sugar 4 level tablespoons (c. 30 g), adjust according to sweetness of adzuki paste
- Rice flour, fine (‘jōshinko’) ¼ cup (c. 30 g)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Note that the ‘koshi-an’ paste requires preparation in advance, as it may take a couple of hours. See the separate recipe for details.



2. In a bowl, combine the koshi-an paste with egg yolk, and mix thoroughly. Then add the rice flour incrementally, stirring continually to prevent lumps from forming until well mixed. Set aside.



3. In another bowl, combine the egg whites with sugar. Whip until soft peaks form.



4. Add the whipped egg whites to the paste prepared at Step 2. Mix with a spoon or spatula using a gentle cutting or folding motion until evenly mixed. [Do NOT stir vigorously as the frothiness of the egg whites will be destroyed.]



5. Line a heat-resistant mould for steaming with baking paper to prevent sticking. Transfer the cake mixture into the mould and smoothen the top with a spatula or similar. Seal the top of the mould with a sheet of aluminium foil or a heat-resistant lid, ensuring that it does not touch the top of the mixture.



6. Place the sealed mould in a steamer (or improvised version of a steamer). Place over medium–high heat and steam for c. 20 minutes until set. [Ensure you put the mould in the

steamer BEFORE turning on the heat, so the cake mixture gradually heats up. Otherwise the top of the cake may split.] Remove from the heat and allow to cool to room temperature. If required, place in the refrigerator to stiffen sufficiently for easy cutting.

7. Cut into small rectangles using a sharp moistened knife. Serve accompanied by green tea or other hot drink of your choice. You can also serve it as part of a dessert combined with fruit, ice-cream and so on. Your ukishima should keep in the refrigerator for 2 to 3 days—use a storage container with a lid to prevent drying out.